WHAT'S TO BECOME OF US?
Isaiah 66:18-23, Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-14
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Back in the summer of 1961, in the middle of Divinity School, I took a job as a Production Worker with the Ford Motor Company at its large Stamping Plant in Chicago Heights, Illinois. It was one of the most instructive and memorable experiences I have ever had. In college I had studied Labor Law and Labor-Management Relations. In Divinity School I had studied the psychological stress which is generated both at the management and labor levels of major industry. But none of the books I had read, lectures heard or papers written was quite as instructive as a summer on the "production line". The money, by the way, was very good. It enabled us to continue another year of school and I will always be grateful to Ford for that. The day shift began at seven: for eight hours, with time out for lunch and two coffee breaks, I worked on a production line, operating a welding machine: which is to say pushing a piece of metal between the electrodes, pressing a button, and then pushing the piece of metal out of the machine. There was not even the remotest resemblance between the particular piece and the automobile or truck of which it was destined to become a part. In fact, it took an act of intellectual will to remember that we were building automobiles, that there was, indeed, a final product. In slightly grander language, it was easy to become so immersed in the tedium of the immediate task that the final vision was lost, the purpose toward which we were working.

I was as fascinated with the behavior of my fellow workers as I was bored by the work. There seemed to be a great deal of anger and hostility in the air constantly, mostly directed toward "them" which meant management - the company. On occasion a worker would damage a part or a machine intentionally. I had read about that sort of thing, but I was startled every time I saw it happen. The aggression and hostility level was quite high, and studies confirm that assembly line workers suffer from an abnormally high amount of stress-related ailments.

Now, one summer does not qualify me as an expert on the complexities of labor-management relations,but part of the problem, I thought, was that workers could not see what it was they were building. There was no vision of the final product, the end toward which the whole process was moving.

We need a vision to survive. We need a goal toward which we are moving; a grand sweeping scheme that gathers up our individual lives and gives them meaning and purpose. We need, that is to say, a measure of hope. That has been the function of religion - the provision of hope in the form of the final vision; the answer to that eternal question, "What's to become of us?"

The Bible is full of hints. I shall return to both texts but for now please recall the soaring promises of Isaiah:

> "For as the new heaven and new earth which I will make shall remain before me,"says the Lord: "so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath all flesh shall come to worship before me," says the Lord.

For thousands of years the Jews lived under the vision of the "Day of the Lord", the coming of the Messianic Age when all nations would bow before the God of Abraham.

Jesus kept before His disciples a vision of God's Kingdom coming on earth, growing silently - like a mustard seed, proceeding like leavening in bread, a Kingdom in which God would reign and His will be done on earth as in Heaven.

We live in a time that has laid to rest many of its grandest visions. From the outset the American mentality has been the most hopeful, the most optimistic about the prospects for humanity. But today it is a very difficult time for hope. Camelot in Washington came and went, never, apparently, to return. We lost a war, thousands of miles from home, against an elusive, determined enemy: and we lost another war domestically against the equally elusive and determined forces of poverty. The rich idealism and optimism which fired the souls of young people in the sixties and sent them overseas in the Peace Corps, or into the Ghettos in VISTA or into the streets in the Civil Rights movement has evaporated and once more we find ourselves talking about apathy, cynicism, and college graduates whose noblest goal is a two story house, two cars and a bank account. In two decades we have seen the slowing of our world dominance and the emergence of an ugly anti-American attitude in the emerging nations in Africa, South America and the Far East. We have experienced disillusionment with science and technology once thought to be our saviors. We have had to face the fact that our resources are not inexhaustable, that our environment is fragile and already badly polluted, that our cities are becoming uninhabitable, that our educational structures cannot remedy every problem. There is, that is to say, a crisis of hope in our land; a monumental amount of hand-wringing: a lot of plaintive wailing about "What is to become of us?" A favorite parlor game - perhaps the favorite game - is "Ain't it awful?" Everybody plays it: the world is going to hell in a handbasket and a truly competitive player will outdo everyone else in holding up the most dramatic illustrations and expressing the most long-faced skepticism.

"Without a vision the people perish" the Old Testament suggests. Without hope, people behave in predictable ways. Anger, hostility, aggression form one of the behavior patterns of hopeless people. I learned that at Ford, and we should know the lesson well after persistent Ghetto violence. I was interested to read the Time Magazine cover article several weeks ago on the "Underclass", that relatively new segment of our population which is so low on the economic ladder that even the welfare state loses track of its members. The numbers are growing in large cities. Their major characteristic is the total absence of hope. There is no dream, no vision, no possibility that tomorrow will be better than today. As a result the underclass lives by an entirely different set of rules: there is no loyalty to common values which provide the cement for our society such as hard work, cleanliness, ambition, integrity, respect for life and property. The goal of existence is simply survival.

An alternate form of hopeless behavior known to psychiatrists who work with depressive patients is despair and cynicism and apathy. Recent studies with survivors of Nazi concentration camps suggest that hope made the difference: that the human spirit is indominatable so long as hope remains. But when the vision perishes, so does the will to live. Ernest Gordon, Chaplain at Princeton University, in Through the Valley of the Kwai describes the disarray and apathy in a Japanese POW camp - until American bombers were sited one day, and hope was reborn. Men began to live and move and organize and feel better. Hope made all the difference between the dogged determination to live and simple submission to death.

At the entrance to hell in Dante's Divine Inferno there stands a sign which reads, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." If you are looking for a definition of hell may I suggest that there is none better than "trying to live life without hope"?

We live in a time that has witnessed a crisis in the glowing hope of American society and we are reaping the results. Beneath societal hopes, however, Christian Hope has faired no better. Ernest Campbell, until recently Pastor of New York's Riverside Church, writes: "A minister may now presume, no matter where he preaches, that the congregation gathered before him is beset with a sense of discouragement...I am convinced that the main cause of discouragement, whether personal or corporate, is the inability to believe in a future we can reach." (Locked in a Room with Open Doors, p.55)

Let's think for a minute about two of the hopes we can remember. At the beginning of this century the church was inspired by the hope that the whole world would be won to Jesus Christ within a generation. The hope, and the Missionary Movement which accompanied it, was one of the most dynamic phenomena in the entire course of Christian history. Thousands of young people answered the call and entered the mission field. The Gospel was planted and took root in exotic lands overseas and church life in America was dominated by missionary activity: congregations - this one included - gave money, clothing, goods, prayed and provided the fuel for the day of victory. But it didn't come. In fact, the rise of nationalism was often accompanied by a resurgence of native religion: missionaries were no longer welcome. Christianity was identified with the hated colonial powers. No one is talking about winning the world for Christ in this generation.

At home, the early days of the Social Gospel movement were a result of a hope that education, liberal legislation, fair labor practices and hard work would produce the visible Kingdom of God in this continent. Walter Rauschenbush believed it and up in Rochester wrote the definitive book which everybody read. So did Washington Gladden, at First Congregational Church down the street. But that didn't work either - at least in the forms and models conceived by its adherents.

The two most dramatic hopes of church in our time were not realized. The result is that we have simply stopped talking about the future in the church. Things have not worked out the way we planned; we have retreated, retrenched, drawn in our flanks, concentrated on the immediacies of the present and forgotten how to use the future tense. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, perhaps the most widely read living Christian scholar, has identified the loss of hope as the theological crisis of our generation: "Eschatology" (the doctrine of last things), he writes, "has been reduced to an irrelevant appendix on our agenda." Moltmann has correctly seen that if you don't believe God is doing something in history and guiding the whole process you don't really have a God at all. But we don't talk about it and we are profoundly embarassed by those who do. Dr James McCord, President of Princeton Seminary, said it in a speech this summer: "We must recover the future in terms of our vision - a liberated, redeemed, reconciled humanity. We are so overwhelmed by the present we don't preach about the future: our theology ends with the Cross and we miss the triumph of Easter. So our people follow the wandering 'swami' and the eschatological freak because they talk about the future." The fact is that ideologies which point to the future with hope have taken the initiative away from the church. Che Guevvara talked about a new society, and middle class Christian young people made him a hero.

The power of Marxism in the third world is precisely here: Christianity seems to have given up on the future - but the resident Communist appears to believe that the future is worth working for and dying for.

In the middle of the Sixth Century B.C. the Neo-Babylonian Period was coming to a close. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had long ceased to exist and the remnants of Judah were languishing in Babylonian captivity. For the Jews the time was anything but hopeful.

Someone wrote them a letter - a letter to a group of miserable exiles in a foreign land. It occupies the fortieth through the sixty-sixth chapters of the Book of Isaiah. It holds up a grand and glorious vision of all nations - all people - worshipping Jahweh, the God of Israel..."I am coming to gather all nations and tongues: and they shall come and see my glory...", says the Lord. How do you suppose that was read by a Jewish prisoner in Babylon? His nation was gone: he - and all his people - were tottering on the very edge of extinction. How in the world do you make sense of a vision like that? Sensible people were betting on the Persians or at least settling in and becoming comfortable Babylonians. But the hope survived. And somehow those people nurtured and loved it until they made their way back across the desert and renewed their kingdom. And when disaster came again, in the form of Roman Legions and the Jews were dispersed, the vision and the hope were remembered and celebrated and nurtured and passed on in Synagogues around the Passover Table throughout the world right up into the Twentieth Century. It doesn't take a visionary to look at Israel today with a new theological awe.

I chose for a New Testament text several verses from the Book of Hebrews, another letter, this one written to Jewish Christians in the First Century. The earliest Christians expected the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world. When it didn't happen they had to adjust and settle in and redefine the hope. The problem at the time the text was written was twofold. First, it was becoming apparent that Christians were to be persecuted: and second, Jewish Christians were tempted to return to the certainty and simplicity of their old religion. The writer admonished: "stiffen your drooping arms and shaking knees, and keep your steps from wavering." And somehow they did. Somehow the tiny Christian communities survived the full onslaught of Roman persecution - because the hope did not die..that through them God was doing something important in the life of the world.

We Christians have been accused at times of being "Pollyannas": of a senseless optimism in the face of contrary reality. I think it was Woody Allen who quipped that when the lamb lies down with the lion he's going to have a rough time of it. But the Bible cannot be painted with that brush. Jesus saw the Kingdom of God coming - in spite of His stumbling disciples, and reluctant countrymen, and the brute power of Rome. He saw the Kingdom coming, slowly, surely, imperceptably in the lives of men and women. And if Easter morning means anything to us it is that the power of His Kingdom is invincible: the gates of hell will not prevail.

What is the content of our hope? Personally, it is that God has made us for more than death: that our lives, our accomplishments, loves, relationships will be gathered up by God and woven into His scheme by a way that will make us laugh for joy when we see it. Corporately, it is just this: someday people will live in harmony with God and because of that in harmony with one another and their environment. Someday swords will be pounded into plows and the combined efforts of humankind will be turned to healing instead of destroying. Someday the truth of

Jesus Christ will be acknowledged universally and every knee will bow and every tongue confess His Lordship. That is the vision - the hope that will not die and which commands our allegiance.

Ernest Campbell writes, "I think it is time for more of us to get up into a high place to remind a staggering country and a reeling world that history has a future, and that because that future is in the hands of God it is good." (op cit. p.58)

How do you know that for sure? You don't. You can't. You look inside yourself: you trust your own deepest longings and needs and identify your dearest hopes and conclude, as I have, that they were planted in you by God. You look around with eyes of faith and see it happen, like a mustard seed growing or yeast silently leavening a whole loaf. You see the individual act of unselfish love, the cup of water given in love and you thank God for His Kingdom: you watch the countless families making it against all odds: you wonder at the power of love between a man and woman to overcome hurt. With eyes of faith you see a society groping for the way to be fair and honest and good, sometimes almost coming apart at the seams, but always moving forward. You see God's glorious freedom break out - in Africa, or South America or in a Black Ghetto, as men and women stand up and affirm their personhood and you know that all the missionary activity wasn't lost at all. The Kingdom is coming! You experience and see and read the signs in strange places. In the concentration camp where a good and kind chaplain was executed and the Christians assembled secretly, not ashamed of their tears and deep need, and prayed the ancient words of the 56th Psalm:

> 'This I know, that God is for me...
> In God I trust without a fear.
> What can man do to me?"

Or you see the selfless dedication of the scientist to rid the world of cancer and you know there is hope. Or you stand, as clergymen do regularly, by an open grave and look into the faces of dear people carrying the heaviest burden life offers - and you see the hope in them - in their courage and faith.

Rollo May writes: "We are called to do something new, to confront a no-man's-land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths and from which no one has returned to guide us...To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and which few people realize." (The Courage to Create, p.2)

That is what our time demands of us - a courageous leap into the unknown. It is a hard time for hope. But we know a secret. In Jesus Christ we have seen it. In His church we have stumbled onto it on occasion. In following Him we have witnessed it breaking into the world.

> Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
> Doth His successive journeys run;
> His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore
> Till moons shall wax and wane no more. Amen.

Father - give us courage for the living of these days. Give us the eyes of faith to see Your Kingdom in our midst. Give us hearts big enough to welcome it and join. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.